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Montana/Regional News

Budget plan still remains recognizable five weeks in

By MIKE DENNISON Missoulian State Bureau

HELENA - As the lawmaking wheels grind away at the Montana Legislature, Democratic Gov. Bri Schweitzer's proposed state budget is being put through the wringer - or is it?

Five weeks into the process, budget panels examining this \$7.7 billion behemoth have sliced, dipped and pureed more than a few proposals set forth by the governor.

Spending increases haven't been endorsed for public schools, environmental regulation, the Rev Department and the governor's office.

In other areas, such as the Corrections Department and the university system, the first draft of the budget looks generous, accepting all but a few dollars in proposed spending increases.

Rep. John Sinrud, R-Bozeman and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, is already hearing howls of protest from some whose spending increases haven't been endorsed in this first round.

But Sinrud said Saturday he doesn't see why Democrats would be pushing the panic button.

While the Republican-controlled House may craft a budget substantially less than what Schweitzer wants to spend on state government the next two years in Montana, the political reality is that it won't be the last word on the budget, he says.

The Democrat-controlled Senate gets the final say on the budget, Sinrud says - and there's not much the budget panels crafting this first draft can do about it.

"This is the Democrats' budget," he said. "It's not the Republicans' budget. ... When the Senate deck in the (session-ending) conference committee, they've already spoken."

Still, the six- or eight-person panels that make initial recommendations on the budget are comp work on the rough draft of the budget that goes to the House Appropriations Committee early n

It's likely to be much less than proposed by Schweitzer, who wants a 21 percent increase in sta fund spending over the next two years.

The administration points out that nearly half that \$700 million increase is "one-time" spending such as building construction and maintenance and shoring up public-employee pension funds.

"We have to fill in the fiscal potholes left by previous administration," says David Ewer, the gov budget director. "We're trying to restore (spending) levels needs to meet Montanans' needs in p education, public safety and public health. ...

"I would admit that it's early (in the Legislature), but the early signs are an apparent willingness Republicans that it's OK to have a lot of unfinished needs for Montana."

Here's a snapshot of the action so far, and what's on tap in the coming week:

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HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES: Most of the big-money decisions in this area, which is one-third of the entire state budget, are due this week. The budget panel here has yet to recommend funding on proposed new mental health program at the State Hospital in Warm Springs, welfare, home-health assistance, the Children's Health Insurance Program and developmentally disabled programs.

The panel has endorsed money for 37 new positions at the State Hospital for the mentally ill and "field workers" for foster care.

Rep. Edith Clark, R-Sweetgrass and chairwoman of the panel, says whatever recommendations this week won't be the last word on this huge budget.

"We have a lot of work to do yet, and everything changes," she said Saturday.

EDUCATION: All but \$1 million of the proposed 7 percent, two-year increase for the university is endorsed by the education budget panel.

But last week the panel denied about two-thirds of the proposed \$100 million increase in state public schools and the state Office of Public Instruction.

Linda McCulloch, state superintendent of public instruction and head of OPI, said the panel would not cut money that pays for some existing programs in her office and sustains pay increases that some received last year.

"With the state having a billion-dollar surplus, I did not expect them to be so punitive on schools. These are not good education decisions. These are just punishing schools."

Rep. Bill Glaser, R-Huntley, who sits on the panel, said Saturday that Republican members want to understand how the budget picture will fit together before they endorse certain funding increases.

"It doesn't mean anything at this particular time," he said Saturday. "There was no message sent about those decisions). ... We're just trying to put together a good budget."

CORRECTIONS AND PUBLIC SAFETY: The panel here endorsed all but \$4 million of a proposed \$27 million, 27 percent increase for the two-year budget of the Corrections Department. Its only major change tilted more money toward payments to regional prisons and the private prison in Shelby.

The state judiciary system's budget also has a 15 percent increase in this first go-round.

ENVIRONMENT: About two-thirds of the Department of Environmental Quality's requested increase has been rejected, including 16 of 19 new personnel it is seeking.

DEQ Director Richard Opper says the personnel and funding are needed to help his agency process and other actions regarding two major economic drivers in the state: housing construction in new subdivisions and energy projects.

"We're obviously disappointed," he said of the initial budget decisions. "The important thing here is that we want to facilitate economic development in the two economic engines of the state."


BUILDING PROJECTS: Decisions are expected this week on the Schweitzer administration's major proposals. The panel examining this budget is still holding hearings on House Bill 5, which contains those projects.

They include \$24 million for a new building to house the state computer center, \$28.5 million to reconstruct Gaines Hall at Montana State University, \$26 million for reconstruction of U.S. Highway 93 in western Montana, \$10 million for renovations at the State Hospital in Warm Springs, and \$15 million to improve state parks and fishing access sites.

OTHER: Gov. Schweitzer's office has won endorsement of only half of the \$2 million, 20 percent increase sought, as the panel denied a request to create a federal relations function within his office.

Decisions began Friday on the budget for the Revenue Department, which is seeking a \$34 million, 34 percent increase. The agency wants to create free electronic tax filing, beef up some collections and add personnel to do statewide reappraisal of property for tax purposes.

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